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ABSTRACT

This guide presents a program for group counseling with foster parents who have had preservice training and an orientation to agency procedures. The program consists of six group sessions, each with its own objectives, thematic content, and methods. Counseling methods include group discussion, guided fantasy, and role playing. Thematically, the program is divided into two sections, the first of which focuses on the changes in family structure and dynamics that result from the addition of a foster child. Discussions center on preplacement family planning, meeting the child's developmental needs, techniques to assure adjustment of the child and siblings, and methods of establishing a loving and trusting relationship with the child. The second section is devoted to the special needs of the foster child, particularly those related to the experience of separation. The normal problems of adjustment are discussed, as are the problems of emotionally disturbed children in foster care. Foster parents also learn methods of developing a positive working relationship with the agency and their caseworker. The program organizer recommends follow-up after the program to maintain support and encouragement for the foster parents. (Author/CS)

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Group Counseling for Foster Parents: Techniques for Growth and Family Development

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Group Counseling for Foster Parents

Session I - Purpose of the Group Experience: Merging the Concerns and Problems of the Foster Parents

Introduction

This group counseling experience is directed toward foster parents who have had preservice training and an orientation to agency structure and procedures. The group content may be varied so that experienced foster parents seeking continuing education may be included.

Objectives

The purpose of this session is:

1. To establish a positive group norm of mutual aid, information sharing and support. De-emphasize the "leader as expert" role.
2. To encourage foster parents to share their fears, concerns and problems and to incorporate these into later sessions.
3. To establish commonalities between group members and to set positive expectations for the group experience.
4. To obtain a committment from group members regarding attendance, "attending" (i.e., attending to each other), and confidentiality.
5. To assist members in some initial exploring and clarifying of their new role as foster parents as well as their motivation and fantasies about being foster parents.

Session Content

1. Exploring normal anxiety of incorporating a new member into the family and presenting a model of "imperfection."
2. Ambivalence faced by all foster parents.
3. Use of small group discussion to explore commonalities with group leader facilitating a "group" focus.
4. Discussion of typical day in the household.
5. Guided fantasy and group discussion to explore areas of personal expectations and motivations for being a foster parent.
6. What are the member's fantasies about the biological parents? How might these images affect the foster child?

Session II - Family Structure and Lifestyle and Special Problems of Placement Related to Family Structure

Objectives

The foster parent, after completing this session:

1. Demonstrates an awareness of different family lifestyles and differences in values, habits and communication patterns.
2. Indicates a sensitivity to and some acceptance of family lifestyle that differs from their own.
3. Recognizes possible effects when a family member leaves or new members enter the family.

Session Content

These are the major concepts that undergird the session:

1. The family historically has been the significant vehicle for the individual's socialization.
2. Generally speaking, separation from the family is anxiety-provoking.
3. The longer an individual remains in a family, the more lasting the effects of the family on the individual's values, beliefs, and behavior.
4. Every family has assigned to its members certain roles and expectations.
5. With introduction of a new person into the family system, every member's position (role) shifts.
6. Every family has its unique communication patterns, verbal and non-verbal.

Methods

1. Share experiences from your own family lifestyle - Who was the most significant family member? How was his/her influence felt in the family?
2. In your family, when one person left by marriage, death, going to work vacation, etc., how did roles shift?
3. Discuss your family's birth order. How did the family change after each birth? How might a foster child who is the eldest (youngest, middle, only) fit into your family?
4. Discuss how your family communicates.

Session III - Normal Child Development as it Relates to the Foster Child

Objectives

The purpose of this session is:

1. To assist foster parents in evaluating the appropriateness of the child's behavior.
2. To assist foster parents in recognizing and meeting the child's specific developmental needs.
3. To increase foster parents skills in providing enriching growth experiences.

Session Content

The following content is based on Erikson's developmental stages:

1. The various developmental stages from infancy through adolescence.
2. The major developmental tasks to be accomplished at these stages.
3. Some specific developmental roadblocks encountered by foster children.
4. Ways the foster parent can enhance the foster child's growth and development.

Methods

Basic format for this session:

1. A brief presentation of information by the leader.
2. Group discussion of the information presented.
3. Application of the information via practice or examples.
4. Assignments such as describing the current level of development of a particular child (physical, mental, emotional, social), pointing out the norm for this age and how he/she differs.
5. Discussing your own children's development and the current issues they are dealing with.
6. Discuss the stage of adult development the foster parents are experiencing (i.e., young adult, middle age, etc.) and how your developmental needs may affect the foster child.

Session IV - Handling Specific Problem Behaviors

Objectives

The purpose of this session is:

1. To give a better understanding of the meaning of the negative behavior often exhibited by children in foster care.
2. To understand the goals of misbehavior of children and how to identify these goals.
3. To learn effective ways of handling negative behavior.
4. To give support to foster parents who are going through a difficult period with the foster child.

Session Content

Points to be made:

1. Anxiety and Fear
   May be expressed through bedwetting, crying and nightmares, and should be dealt with by giving comfort and repeated assurances through actions and words. In the case of bedwetting a physical exam should determine whether there are physical causes.

2. Security Seeking
   May be expressed through hoarding, thumbsucking, masturbation, overeating or running away. Time will be needed to establish trust and faith.

3. Hostility and Anger
   Will be expressed through destructiveness, fighting, aggressive behavior, cruelty and stealing, and should be dealt with by recognizing that anger is a natural reaction and that one has to learn how to handle it. Allow children to discuss their angry feelings and create ways of "discharging" these feelings that are less destructive and annoying. Firm, kind discipline may have to be used to protect people and property. Parents must not, however, fall into the trap of exhibiting lack of control or revenge for hurtful actions.

4. Depression and Hopelessness
   May be expressed through apathy, withdrawal, isolation, refusal to eat. These behaviors should be dealt with by attempts to stimulate interest involving children in small tasks or family activities and constantly showing that you care about them.

5. Frustration
   May be expressed by temper tantrums, overeating and, in older children, use of drugs. For younger children, help them to develop more appropriate methods of expressing frustration such as breaking down difficult tasks into smaller ones that can be more easily accomplished. With older children, frustration may result from overly-harsh self-criticism and parents may work with these children to develop more realistic expectations of themselves.

6. Need for Compensation for Losses
   May be expressed through stealing, lying, fantasizing. Children can be give allowances and the opportunity to earn money and spend it. Children should be helped to control the desire for instant gratification, which causes some kinds of stealing. The stealing should be discussed, and better ways of meeting needs introduced. Children should not be exposed to situations that encourage stealing until they have developed controls.

In ending a session on understanding and dealing with problem behavior, it should be recognized that it will take much time, patience, and flexibility to correct undesireable behavior. Firm, consistent expectations of acceptable behavior, and a constant process of learning and reteaching must take place. A child must feel that you like him/her even you don't always approve of what he does. A child must have reason to believe that you value him/her enough as a person to "see him/her through."

Methods

1. Parents should identify behaviors they have experienced or observed. The group leader guides discussion and sharing of experiences with such questions as:
   What feeling is the child attempting to express?
   What is the behavior a symptom of?
   What is the purpose of the observed behavior?
   What are your feelings in response to the child's behavior?
   How would you handle this type of behavior?

2. The group leader will assist foster parents to interpret the meaning of the exhibited behavior and probable emotional causes. Behavior patterns of the foster child will be related to the feelings being expressed by the child and to the possible goals of that behavior. The leader should emphasize the importance of responding to the feelings that precipitated the behavior and encourage the group to develop strategies of mutual problem solving. For extended training in managing problem behavior the sessions can be supplemented with other systematic training programs (i.e., PET, STEP, Parents are Teachers, etc.).

3. Discussion should also occur regarding appropriate referral procedures for receiving professional psychological or counseling services for children who exhibit extended or severe emotional disturbances. Foster parents should be constantly reminded that they cannot be all things to each child and should remember that they too have limitations.

Session V - Setting Realistic Expectations and the Impact of Separation on the Foster Child and Foster Parents.

Objectives

To further assist foster parents in setting appropriate and realistic expectations for themselves and to better understand their motivations for being a foster parent. Also, this session will help foster parent to understand the meaning of separation and behavior problems that may develop, and the effect of separation on the foster child.

Session Content

1. In this session the expectations and motivations of the foster parents will be re-examined. As the group develops the foster parents should be able to disclose more about their expectations and will be able to evaluate them in light of the feedback from the group as a whole.
2. Help foster parents become aware of their own feelings about separation.
3. Discuss long-range effects of many separations, rejections, inability to maintain permanent relationships.
4. How to deal with feelings of separation, guilt, anxiety, anger, grief, withdrawal.
5. Dealing with each foster parent's tolerance for ambiguity in relation to the child's "temporary placement" in the home. What is each person's need for structure?

Methods

1. Sharing of fantasies concerning expectations of yourself and the foster child can help to clarify unrealistic expectations that may exist.
2. Encourage open discussion of personal motivations for being a foster parent - What are your own rewards for being a foster parent?
3. Have each participant discuss one separation experience and his/her feelings that can be shared with the group. How might this be similar to the feelings you will experience (or the child might experience) at separation?
4. Set up a role play situation involving separation.

Session VI - Foster Parents' Relationship With the Child Welfare Agency

Objectives

The purpose of this session is:

1. To help foster parents develop a positive working relationship with the agency and their caseworker.
2. To maintain this relationship through the placement of the foster child in the home and to develop a model for an ongoing dialogue with the agency.

Session Content

Points to be made:

1. The importance of initiating a positive relationship with the worker from the onset of placement.
2. Methods of asking the agency for help without having to fear that you are appearing incompetent.
3. How to deal with the feeling of being "evaluated" by caseworkers.
4. Discussion of the role of a Foster Parent Association and how the FPA can serve the function of providing continuing support and education for foster parents.

Methods

1. Small group discussion to brainstorm ideas and procedures for developing positive relationships with agencies and workers.
2. Role playing and modeling of appropriate assertive and proactive behaviors.

This session will also serve as a wrap-up session to review any issues left hanging from previous sessions and to provide a sense of closure for the group. Ideally, these group sessions should build in some type of continuing follow-up in order for the foster parents to maintain support and encouragement on an ongoing basis.